

A Whistle Away From Death

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As I headed topside for sea-and-anchor detail, I ran through the list of checks for the Kapok life vest I was wearing. Collar ties tied, check. Chest ties tied, check. Waist ties tied, check. Crotch straps attached to rings and tightened, check. Waist strap attached to rings and tightened, check. I really thought I was set to handle lines, but as I soon would learn, I had overlooked a small but important detail.

Our submarine was leaving port with the help of tugs until we lined up in the channel. The tugs pulled us away from the pier and out into the channel where line handlers cast off the after tug. Meanwhile, the forward tug jockeyed our ship into position for a straight shot out of the channel. When ordered to cast off the line attached to the forward tug, personnel aboard the tug eased the strain on the line, and I removed it from the cleat.

I then grabbed the heaving line attached to the tug's head line so I could tend it and keep it from going into the water between the tug and the side of our boat. A shipmate grabbed the heaving line behind me to help tend it as tug personnel started pulling it aboard. Suddenly, my whistle lanyard flipped up, wrapped around the heaving line, and,

before I knew it, I was being pulled toward the tug. Because there were no safety lines, I had nothing to grab. (Safety lines and stanchions aboard a submarine leaving port are removed in preparation for diving the boat.)

I had only one choice: I started yelling for tug personnel to stop pulling as I struggled to free myself. I was at the point of no return, watching the tug surging in the swells against the side of the ship, when a shipmate realized what was happening. He grabbed me from behind and pulled me to safety. A split second later, the tug personnel felt the added resistance and stopped pulling the line, which allowed me to free myself.

This incident lasted only seconds, but it made a lasting impression on me. As a result of seeing my life flash before my eyes that day, I always make sure I tuck my whistle inside my life vest. I also go around and make sure my shipmates tuck in their whistles. Some of them look at me a little strangely, wondering why I harp on such a small detail, but I can stand their looks because I know what can happen in the blink of an eye. 🚢

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